



CRS Report for Congress

Field Hearings: Fact Sheet on Purposes, Rules, Regulations, and Guidelines

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Field hearings are congressional hearings held outside Washington. They date at least to the Civil War, when committees sometimes traveled to the front lines to observe conditions and war preparedness. For more information on legislative process, see [<http://www.crs.gov/products/guides/guidehome.shtml>].¹

Purposes of Field Hearings. Members and committees hold field hearings for a variety of reasons. A field hearing brings Congress directly to the scene of an important national issue. For example, in the 110th Congress, a Senate subcommittee held a field hearings in New Orleans, Louisiana, on the status of repairs in the aftermath of the Katrina and Rita hurricanes. A field hearing can serve other purposes. It can

- raise public visibility of an issue;
- provide an opportunity to evaluate a government program “on site”;
- reinforce a Member’s relationship with his or her constituents; and
- attract local and sometimes national media attention.

Chamber Rules. The formal authority for field hearings is found implicitly in chamber rules. House Rule XI, clause 2, states in part that a committee is authorized “to sit and act at such times and places within the United States, whether the House is in session, has recessed, or has adjourned, and to hold such hearings as it considers necessary.” Similarly, Senate Rule XXVI, paragraph 1, states that a committee “is authorized to hold such hearings to sit and act at such times and places during the sessions, recesses, and adjourned periods of the Senate” as it sees fit. Otherwise, chamber rules do not distinguish field hearings from those held in Washington.

Committee Rules. House and Senate committee rules are generally silent on field hearings specifically, but, in the rules for the 110th Congress, some committees included related provisions. For example, the rules of the Senate Committee on Agriculture,

¹ This report was originally written by Thomas P. Carr, formerly an Analyst in American National Government at CRS. The listed author has updated this report and is available to respond to inquiries on the subject.

Nutrition, and Forestry and the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence both require that members be notified 48 hours prior to a field hearing. (For hearings held in Washington, D.C., the notice requirement is 24 hours.) Rules of the House Committee on Education and Labor provide another example, specifying that field hearings may only be scheduled when authorized by the chairman of the full committee.

Regulations and Guidelines. Funding for committee travel and other administrative issues raised by field hearings are covered by regulations established by the House Administration Committee and the Senate Rules and Administration Committee. In the House, regulations printed in the House Administration Committee's *Committees' Congressional Handbook* cover matters specific to field hearings. The handbook is available from the committee and can be viewed online at [<http://cha.house.gov/services/committeehandbook.htm>]. In the Senate, committee travel in general is governed by regulations compiled in the *U.S. Senate Handbook*. Print and online versions of the handbook are available — to Senate offices only — from the Senate Committee on Rules and Administration.

It is common for committees to prepare guidelines or informal checklists for field hearings based on chamber and committee rules and practices as well as the respective travel regulations of the House Administration Committee and the Senate Rules and Administration Committee. Expenses incurred by a Representative, Senator, or staff aide attending a field hearing — including transportation, lodging, meals and incidentals — are reimbursable by the committee holding the hearing. When a field hearing involves oversight of a federal agency, it may be possible, under a committee's oversight authority, to request that the agency provide transportation for committee members and staff. Usually, such requests require a letter from the committee chair to the agency head.

Although field hearings involve some administrative matters different from Washington hearings, most of the procedural requirements are the same: scheduling, notice, subpoena authority, quorum requirements, broadcasting, and the like. Notably, field hearings cannot be explicitly employed for political or electoral purposes. Regulations in the House forbid official travel for any political or campaign purposes, and Senate regulations forbid reimbursement for per diem associated with official travel during the 60 days before a Senator's name appears on a ballot.² Publications of the House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, *Rules of the U.S. House of Representatives on Gifts and Travel* and the *Senate Ethics Manual* provide details on permissible and nonpermissible reimbursements for Member's official and other travel.³

² The Senate regulations provide some exceptions for airfare and in cases when a Senator whose election is not contested. Campaign funds are allowed to cover per diem in some circumstances. See *Senate Ethics Manual*, S.Pub. 108-1, p. 120, available online at [<http://ethics.senate.gov/downloads/pdf/manual.pdf>].

³ The Senate document is available at [<http://ethics.senate.gov/downloads/pdf/manual.pdf>]. The House publication is available at [http://www.house.gov/ethics/Gifts_and_Travel_Chapter.htm]. In the 110th Congress, the House adopted (in H.Res. 6) new regulations governing travel. The new guidelines do not apply to committee-funded travel, or that paid for by federal, state, or local government entities. See “New Travel Rules for Officially-Connected Travel Paid for by a Private Source,” Memorandum to All Members, Officers, and Employees,

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Venue. No rule or regulation determines a field hearing's location. Committee or subcommittee leadership usually choose the location, including the specific site, such as a federal building, public school, or private facility. It may be necessary for staff to travel to the field location a day or more before the hearing to make certain administrative arrangements — including layout of tables and chairs for Members, witnesses, and the public, as well as setup of a sound system. Other advanced preparations may include arrangements for security personnel and sound system technicians.

³ (...continued)

House Committee on Standards of Official Conduct, Mar. 14, 2007, available at [http://www.house.gov/ethics/m_travel_rules_paid_private_source.htm].